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Abstract

The canonical narratives (Bruner, 2004) of contemporary research with children include participation, agency and voice. This inclusive language has saturated research literature throughout the development of the “new” social studies of childhood (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Their presence was highlighted as illuminating greater understanding of the social realities of children’s lives but they mask and mute as much as they reveal. Heralded as the holy grail of emancipatory research with children, participatory methods have come to be recognized almost exclusively as the route for ethical practice and valid data. The absence of substantial, critical evaluation results in these concepts being little more than “cherished conceits” (Segal, 1999, p. 118). There has been a lack of thorough interrogation of what participation actually means and the data and social relations it produces. Participation implies collaboration and reciprocity but is counter-intuitively used to seek and promote the agentic child enshrined in neoliberalism. Children as social beings negotiate complex social relations (Richards, Clark, & Boggis, 2015) but this is often lost in research encounters which privilege the individual voice, informed by an under-interrogated definition of agency. Instead of following the neoliberal agenda we argue that recognizing the ways in which participatory methods, agency, and voice can and should promote reciprocal and relational social realities is vital to a better understanding of the worlds of children. We call not for their expulsion from research methods but for a re-evaluation of the assumptions that lie beneath and what is produced in their name.

Keywords:

Research with children, participation, agency, relational agency, voice, neoliberalism

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Participatory methods have been heralded as holding the promise of including children in the generation of knowledge about the social world more effectively and collaboratively than previous methods, which have traditionally positioned the child as object rather than subject. This is, for the most, part an uncontested stance that as childhood scholars we have hitherto collectively embraced. As such, the establishment of this approach is entrenched in how we study childhood and research with children. However, there is an emerging critique which calls for greater critical evaluation of the key narratives and concepts upon which this approach is premised (Hammersley, 2016; Philo, 2011; Prout, 2011; Tisdall, 2012). This chapter is positioned as a response to calls for reconceptualizing some of the cherished conceits that this approach embodies.

A powerful and predominantly uncontested rights discourse swept through the social institutions of childhood as part of the “new” social studies of childhood (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Provisions surrounding the family, school, and welfare approaches toward children were adapted to better reflect the elevated rights status of the “being” child. This paradigm shift ensured that dictums such as “best interests,” “the voice of the child,” and “children as agentic” are now promoted as normative throughout contemporary welfare development. They are regarded as emblematic of children as rights holders and demonstrative of adult commitment to the fulfillment and protection of these rights.

Participatory research with children emerged as part of this cultural shift, situated within a more general qualitative turn in the social sciences (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Participation has been defined as “the sense of knowing that one’s actions are taken note of and may be acted upon” (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, p. 24). Like the dominant contemporary approaches to the study of childhood and children’s lives, participatory methods have come to be regarded as instrumental in promoting the dictums – participation, agency, and voice – through compliance to a benign and somewhat tokenistic rights discourse. After all, who would challenge that the best interests of children should be central, that the voices of children should be heard, or that their agency should be assured? The inevitable controversy of promoting rights of a particular group – in that it must always come at the expense of another (Marx, 1959) – has been averted in children’s rights debates through being reduced to three basic components: children should be included (participation), children should be active in their social worlds (agency), and children should be allowed to speak about their lives (voice). The inclusion of such neutral and mostly uncontested concepts (with exceptions such as Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Uprichard, 2010) are recognized as evidence of a rights discourse that allows for the comfortable assumption that children’s lives are elevated by the presence of such enlightened concepts. Powell and Smith (2009) argue that participation can “enhance children’s skills and self-esteem, support better decision-making and protection of children and improve policies for children” (p. 124). The necessity for children to acquire these skills, as a part of a contemporary neoliberal citizenship agenda, is a neglected yet ever present undercurrent in the study of children and childhood in and out of the academy (Raby, 2014).

In their enactment, these skills have become more representative of the responsibilities and obligations of children as neoliberal citizens in the making rather than the effective articulation of their rights as children. The language of collaboration and participation evoked in current policy and participatory methods are the mechanisms through which the autonomous, agentic, individualized citizen is developed and privileged. In a neoliberal saturated society (Strickland, 2002) these three dominant components of children's rights – participation, agency, and voice – have become adult-led “cherished conceits” (Segal, 1999, p. 18), assumptions that we live by but rarely choose to interrogate. Here, we contribute to emerging debates in research with children that call for the interrogation of and challenge to the dominance of these concepts in their contemporary forms (Bragg, 2007; Raby, 2014).

The transformation of research into childhood and children's lives as a result of the new social studies and a universal rights agenda should not be underestimated. Children as participants is a mantra now recognized as normative, commonly positioned as ethically superior to other approaches. Research that does not promote such participation is often seen as ethically dubious and less effective in achieving valid data. Producing a social science research proposal which does not promote the voices of children is likely to receive a less than positive response from an ethics committee in institutions where childhood as a social phenomenon is studied. The current positioning of children as the ultimate experts in their lives emerged out of the new sociology of childhood (see James et al., 1998), and its manifestation in research with children is sometimes taken to the extent that they are situated as researchers themselves (Cheney, 2011) involved in the selection of fieldwork method and analysis (Kellett, 2005; Murray, 2015a, 2015b). This is representative of the general elevation of the status of children in the research process and is an extension of the shifts in power indicative of current qualitative research, whereby groups are given more control over research “about” them; for example, indigenous groups (Chilisa, 2009). However, this construction is not representative of all groups perceived as marginalized, in which specific examples such as sex offenders (Hammersley, 2016) are not afforded such rights or agency. In addition, notions of empowerment, which are articulated through the hearing of voices within participatory methods, require further interrogation.

Here, Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality is relevant and already integrated elsewhere in explorations of childhood (see Pike, 2008; Smith, 2014), but its application to the practice of research with children is limited. The liberal notion of empowerment grounded in a desire to hand power to perceived powerless groups can be challenged when considering governmentality (Bragg, 2007). By recognizing such desires for children's participation as part of strategies or techniques to construct subjects capable of bearing the burdens of liberty in advanced liberal western democracies (Rose, 1999), participatory methods and rights to participation discourses seem less benign than initially assumed. When demanding participation of children by requiring they share their voices, we facilitate their acquisition of the necessary techniques of self (Bragg, 2007). Power, thus, becomes further entrenched at both the institutional and individual levels.

In this chapter, we take three canonical components of contemporary ethical research with children – participation, agency, and voice – and critically evaluate their roles in the production of knowledge about childhood, children, and their lives. Here, we question their presence in research as being emblematic of a rights discourse. We challenge the current definitions of these terms, calling instead for alternative interpretations of these concepts in participatory research, which are not only more

representative of how children live their lives but also potentially more fruitful in the data they produce.

## Participation

The expectation that children should participate in activities which affect their lives has been transformative in how institutions, such as education, are organized (Burke, 2005; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Such transformation is reflective of the ways participatory democracy and active participation has spread from the confines of the conventional spheres of politics and economics into “the organization and relations of social and cultural life” to include welfare institutions and the family (Gould, 1988, quoted in Lister, 2003, p. 26). Such an expansion of the definitions of what it means to be political, by including participation in both public and private institutions (Lister, 2003), extends the capacity and the responsibility for children to be involved in this citizenry shift. School councils, citizenship as a curricular subject, and the roles of school in local communities are demonstrative of the ways children play a far more active role in the life of the school than previously recognized (Wyse, 2001). Despite this emphasis, James (2007) argues that constructing children as citizens in the social world with ideas to contribute remains patchy; ironic, given the emphasis by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) on children’s participation worldwide. Constructed as a fundamental right in childhood, participation becomes an obligation of contemporary neoliberal citizenship most clearly articulated as a compulsion to participate economically (Lister, 2003). To endow rights also requires the endowment of responsibility within the contemporary articulation of rights discourse (Hammersley, 2015). The rights of a child to participate are used to generate the skills needed from the ideal adult citizen (see Bragg, 2007) for whom individual responsibility and autonomy become a necessity of contemporary neoliberal landscapes. This makes the presence of participation in the lives of children less about a right and more about an obligation to learn the expectations of contemporary adulthood.

This participation, when present in research, facilitates alternative method selection. Pictures and drawings (Liamputtong, 2007; McTague, Froyum, & Risman, 2017), photography (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Nunes de Almeida, Carvalho, & Delicado, 2017), online methods (Ringrose & Barajas, 2011; Standlee, 2017), focus groups (Christensen, 2004; Zonio, 2017), ethnographic approaches (Hagerman, 2017; Montgomery, 2007; Scheer, 2017), and stories (McNamee & Frankel, 2017; Richards, 2012) all seek and promote ways to effectively ensure the participation of children. There are some dissenters who question the necessity for such specific methods to facilitate the participation of children. Punch (2002) claims that adults, too, would like to use such methods and therefore argues for their extension into adult research. Uprichard (2010) questions the narrowness of the ways children participate by claiming that children continue to be asked only to contribute to topics pertaining to their lives or childhood more broadly. True participation, she argues, will only come when children are involved in research which is not directly related to their lives or childhood exclusively.

Rich and colorful ways of engaging with children in research are not to be condemned, and such diverse methodology can facilitate the inclusion of previously hidden and marginalized groups (Tisdall, 2012). Nevertheless, we argue that a focus on method alone is insufficient to understand children’s lives. A better route is to pay greater attention to existing and emerging relationships and relatedness between researchers and researched. As Schwandt (2001) argues, it is important to

recognize that “dialogue and conversation ... are the conditions in which understanding emerges” (pp. 181–182). Despite this, we as researchers often focus extensively on our methods of choice rather than the social relations that are produced within it, through which we can then claim an ethical stance and thus ensure the effective inclusion of children. Those reading the research can assume that the rights of the children to participate in issues that affect their lives have been effectively met. Little interrogation beyond these assumptions is evident in most research-based articles (for notable exceptions see Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Hammersley, 2015, 2016; Prout, 2011; Richards, Clark, & Boggis, 2015). This deficit allows participation to be framed and interpreted in multiple ways, beginning with tokenistic consultation through extensive involvement in the whole research process (Hart, 1997). Such activity is perceived to be an enlightened, beneficent approach that regards children as experts in their lives and competent beings able to make useful contributions to social research. There is an assumption that research done with and by children is a legitimate representation of children’s realities (James, 2007). The assumption that the presence of children’s voices holds a revered status must be interrogated. We need to maintain the role of children in research without privileging their voices, where their words hold the status of unquestioned, un-interrogated truths. As academics and researchers, we are quick to pick up on the perceived tokenism of children’s rights in practice; for example, the school council (Robinson & Kellett, 2004; Wyse, 2001), but this stance is less often addressed in our own research practices.

In this chapter, we do not advocate for the demise of participatory approaches, nor underestimate the impact on our knowledge and understanding of children’s social worlds; rather, we seek greater acknowledgment that children’s participation be recognized as representative of both a right and an obligation. We argue that to be framed exclusively as a right for children is both disingenuous and unreflective of the expectations placed on their shoulders to acquire the necessary skills of neoliberal citizenship. Dominant constructions of agency in childhood, articulated as necessary for such participation, are based upon the pursuit of children’s ability to make independent decisions separately from adults (Alderson, 2004). This causes us to question how such an aspiration can be achieved through participatory methods with their implied emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge and meaning. At the heart of participatory methods lies a commitment to children’s individual agency and to the elevation of the voice of the child, and it is to these canonical narratives that we now turn.

## Agency

The imperative to demonstrate children’s capacity for being active in their social worlds, in contradiction to the assumed passivity of previously dominant developmental constructs, ensured that notions of the “being” child were at the forefront of the paradigmatic challenge promoted by the proponents of the new social studies of childhood. Originally championed by Alanen (1988), Corsaro (1997), James et al. (1998), Mayall (2001), Qvortrup (1994), and Wyness (2001), children came to be recognized as active beings in their present state rather than perceived only through their potential as a future investment in adulthood. This key and transformative concept has come to be recognized by the term “active” or “agentic.” Welfare approaches promote this agentic child to the extent that it has become a commonsense concept, holding the status of natural and normative.

The elevation of children’s status from passive recipients to agentic beings also compliments the development of the status of participant in qualitative research methods. Children are regarded as

experts in their social worlds and perceived to be knowledge holders, in contrast to adult researchers (Stanley & Wise, 1993). It is, therefore, unsurprising that the agency of children is a popular and well-used concept in participatory research and has become inextricably entwined with methodological and ethical values. Agency and its close companion autonomy (terms which are often used interchangeably) have become cherished virtues in participatory research, whereby methods such as focus groups, photography, and storytelling are frequently claimed by those using them to facilitate a somehow otherwise latent attribute of agency in those who take part. The agentic child does not enter the field of research but by virtue of a methodology and method she/he is somehow constructed through it. Such agency is not only desirable but also regarded as achievable and in direct opposition to other key constructs of childhood, those of passivity and vulnerability. Somewhat counter-intuitively, ethical approval of participatory approaches frequently requires the articulation of discourses of vulnerability in applications to ethics committees, where regard for young participants must reflect childhood as an inherently dependent, fragile state requiring sensitivity, skill, and particular caution. Researchers then must navigate a contradictory path where different stages of the research process require the dichotomous childhood constructs of passivity and agency to be central (Richards, 2013; Richards et al., 2015).

Neglected in these research discussions are clear definitions of what agency and autonomy might actually mean and how such terms are applied elsewhere in childhood. The context in which participatory methods and the new social studies of childhood are situated in the United Kingdom and the United States is one saturated in neoliberalism, where specific attributes in adult citizens are desired and privileged. Rational, autonomous individualism are qualities expected and necessary for contemporary citizens whose primary responsibility can be argued to focus on economic participation (Lister, 2003). As Raby (2014) argues “children’s participation is grounded within a broader context of neoliberalism which favors privatization, liberalized trade, the erosion of the welfare state, and individual autonomy over citizen interdependence” (p. 80). It is therefore to be expected that children, as citizens in waiting, are provided with the means by which they can acquire the skills of adulthood. Environments for agentic action are provided but controlled by adults (such as school and research projects). These settings represent an opportunity to learn the necessary skills required for neoliberal citizenry. Participation is claimed as a benefit for children and young people in order to facilitate “personal importance, self-esteem ... and self-determination” (Raby, 2014, p. 80). Agency has thus become a tool of the state for self-regulation and self-governance of its citizens, rather than an exclusive part of the emancipatory project it professes to be (Walkerline, 1990). James (2007) challenges childhood academics to interrogate the “core issues of social theory” (p. 262) to realize the aspirations of what agency for children can offer. We argue that in order to do this we have to re-evaluate the current definitions and applications of this concept within participatory research with children.

The individual, agentic child is developed through participatory methods. Yet, alternative definitions of agency can be recognized in the social interactions of children. As adept social beings, children navigate complex social hierarchies, relationships, and spaces imbued with unequal power relations, where their status is predominantly (but not always) a subordinate one. Such social positioning requires agency but not the normative individualized concept of agency where self-interest and individual choice are privileged, and emblematic of what Walter and Ross (2014) term the “in control model” (p. 16). In contrast, the social or relational model views agency as emerging through relationships with others (Twine, 1994). These ideas of relational agency and greater

acknowledgment of the complex relations between adults and children are undermined by entrenched, simplistic constructions of agency.

Social agency is far more indicative of the ways children manage their relationships, which require skills in negotiation, compromise, and empathy. For example, in her analysis of cinematic representation of childhood agency, Castro (2005) highlights how agency can emerge through bodies and friendships. Mauthner (1997) describes these relationships as being “characterized by intimacy and negotiation” (pp. 21–22). Within the research literature, focus groups are argued to be a particularly useful method to capitalize on existing friendship relations for children (Christensen, 2004). However, these benefits are articulated to justify the use of a particular research tool as effective for facilitating participation rather than to critically and explicitly consider the role of relationships in the knowledge constructions that take place through the use of such methods. Reciprocity, mutual obligation, and collaboration are concepts frequently linked to previously dominant social democratic and egalitarian ideologies (Alcock, 2014), which are now commonly conceived of as values, that ill-fit the modern demands on citizens and the ways that we currently live (Raby, 2014). Yet, these qualities are visible in children’s social interactions with adults and other children in everyday life (see Richards et al., 2015). These concepts should be the “bread and butter” of participatory research but they are rarely articulated as relevant, desirable, or indeed inevitable in research with children.

An attempt to raise the profile of “the child” through child-centered pedagogy and participatory methods prizes an individualistic notion of agency and the rights of the individual child. This conversely contributes to the artificial separation of adults and children that a more relational approach could help to address. This separation of intergenerational relations and an emphasis on individual agency devalues collective identities and actions (Langford, 2010). This is not just within the data collection itself but also relevant as children and families make decisions whether to take part in a research project at all. For example, Maundeni (2002) found that responding to children’s questions about her research, in combination with the support of mothers in the family environment, enabled the children to make more informed decisions about their participation in interviews. This demonstrates, as we argue elsewhere (Richards, 2013; Richards et al., 2015), that agency emerges and is articulated through research relationships. After all, it is through communication, rather than method, that we are able to perceive and exercise power (Robinson & Kellett, 2004). In Twum-Danso Imoh’s (2013) work, we also see the importance of re-evaluating views of agency that privilege the autonomous individual. Her work on physical punishment demonstrates that children’s views and experiences are shaped by and embedded within interdependent relationships. The situated nature of their perspectives where they reference the views of friends, siblings, parents, teachers, and other members of their communities demonstrate the relational character of social interaction and meaning making. Here, there is no image of the autonomous, individualized, neoliberal citizen in waiting with a singular voice. Rather, what can be imagined is a motif of the child located in a complex web of fluid social interactions and relationships.

Just like adults, children have no claim to agency in absolutist terms and although autonomy is prized for all individuals, it is never without constraint (Hammersley, 2015). In previous discussions (Richards, 2013; Richards et al., 2015), we highlight how children use their social agency to make informed consent choices, interact with other participants, construct their responses to research

questions, and shape the roles that researchers play (teacher, parent, and researcher). We therefore argue here that the pursuit of individualized concepts of agency ensures that the ways children are relationally agentic in their social worlds are overlooked. It is almost as if as researchers we fear admitting the relational aspects of children's voices in our data for fear of damaging the participatory and rights projects themselves. Perhaps we also fear that acknowledging the data and analysis as a relational and participatory endeavor undermines our legitimacy as researchers. However, as Clifford (1988) reminds us, mainstream anthropology manages to embrace the collaborative elements of participatory research in a way that the wider childhood studies community has yet to reach, but must move toward. This lack of self-reflection protects the sanctity of the voice of the child and ensures that researcher expertise is secured. After all, our academic careers are built on such individual endeavors and academia sits within, and is not removed from, the neoliberalist agenda.

We recognize that such communication within relationships can complicate fieldwork and data analysis because whilst these relationships are intrinsic to how we research with children they seem to disperse into the background in the writing up. Findings can become abstracted from the social context in which they were produced (Richards et al., 2015), and are often cleansed of that which reveals cooperation, collaboration, negotiation, and participation as epistemological evidence. Is it too simplistic to argue that participatory methods should at the very least exhibit such equal participation and compromise? Somehow, the ideology of participation has become separate to the practices of participating, where taking part in something is not the same as collaborating, sharing, or building something together. So does the initial problem for participatory methods begin with how we understand the name and the embedded neoliberal concept of agency that is dominant within it? This recurring emphasis on an independent "being" child overshadows the interdependent relational competencies of children demonstrated in participatory methods that evoke the language of collaboration, reciprocity, and inclusion. This hegemony ensures scholars are inevitably destined to reproduce this neoliberal, individualized rhetoric. Such manifestation is highlighted by the emphasis on capturing the "voice" of this agentic child.

## Voice

The desire to include and promote the voices of children, previously neglected in academic disciplines (James, 2007; Mayall, 2001; Waller, 2014), is not surprising. Such voices are said to offer us experiences that we as adults cannot share due to the fundamental and ontological differences between adults and children within society. Desires to hear the views of silenced or marginalized "others" developed in sociology during the 1960s, found in the influential publication "Whose side are we on?" (Becker, 1967). Such accounts, which can be traced back further to the 1920s Chicago School (see Johnson, 2001), were said to allow new views of social life and were adopted and developed by a number of fields such as feminisms (Stanley & Wise, 1993), race, and ethnicity scholarship (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978) and the study of youth subcultures (Hebdige, 1979). However, at no point did Becker (or others) propose that said voices should themselves become dominant. The argument was rather that such perspectives should be given as much weight as those in more powerful positions, not that they should be given more weight; this inverts rather than addresses dominant hierarchies. Despite this, the adoption and extension of some of these assumptions into the field of research with children has resulted in a somewhat peculiar position, whereby children are considered as the only beings (or at least the most superior)



fit to comment upon children and childhood. However, some theorists challenge the notion that children's voices are always epistemologically essential. Philo (2011), for example, controversially argues it is not always helpful or necessary to listen to the voice of the child.

This voice, in its contemporary conceptual guise, is assumed to be a route toward capturing a greater truth than alternative approaches where voice is ignored or neglected. Voice is assumed to convey a reality other methods cannot. Its presence in research suggests validity and strength. This voice is inextricably linked to a rights discourse where the perspectives of children supposedly become available to us once we allow them to speak. The mute passive child becomes transformed into an agentic and involved child simply by the presence of their voice. Participatory methods are seen to be an effective tool in facilitating the release of this hitherto silent voice, thus linking participatory methodologies to children's rights and more enlightened perspectives toward children that reflect the new social studies of childhood. Method alone is seemingly afforded the powers of alchemy in being able to turn a mute, passive child into a vocal, agentic one.

Outside of Childhood Studies, critical theorists such as Giroux (1986) consider hidden coercion in notions of "voice" by highlighting concerns related to the value of silence (Haavind, 2005; Lewis, 2010) and question whose interests are ultimately served by giving primacy to marginalized voices. Such critical reflection is only just emerging in the field of research with children (Richards et al., 2015). There is limited acknowledgment of concerns that existing neoliberal agendas are entrenched through the use of the voices of children, with little recognition that these processes represent additional mechanisms of control rather than enable liberation in childhood (Fielding, 2001). Too little interrogation of the ways in which "voice" is used occurs within conversations surrounding participatory methodologies with children. The presence of the child's voice alone seems to be taken as testament of ethical and empowered status for children. But, like agency, we argue that it is the individualized, not interdependent, voice that is elevated in participatory methods. As researchers, we risk seeking a sanitized sound bite to further our arguments because we are able to abstract "voice," which results in promoting our privileged positions. This leaves behind the social context and relational interactions from which this disembodied voice emerges (Richards et al., 2015). Such abstraction occurs in childhood normatively, which Heywood (2001) reminds us is itself already an abstraction. Voice becomes little more than a vehicle to promote the perspectives of others, rather than the active inclusion of children's views (Kraftl, 2013). Clifford (1988) states that such abstractions are always staged by the writer, and as scholars we should take care to critically consider how far child voices can be argued to truly represent children's experiences.

To elevate voice without the corresponding inclusion of the embedded power relations and interactional context where such voices are articulated does little to empower children, and is potentially exploitative and unrepresentative of their social worlds. For example, such voices are used as evidence for existing paradigms rather than in the production of new knowledge or understanding (James, 2007). Such an argument is not new and can be found across disciplines, where critical theorists drawing on feminisms, postmodernism, and poststructuralism challenge the simplicity of contemporary notions of the child's voice or child-centered research practice. Instead, such theorists argue that the child should be seen as "existing always in a particular social context and in relations with others" (Langford, 2010, p. 119). Despite being significant in early childhood education (Burman, 1994; Walkerdine, 1990), work on children's citizenship (Cockburn, 2013; Wyness, 2001), and understandings of interpretive reproduction (Corsaro, 1997, 2015), this

argument has made little headway in other areas of childhood studies, such as the critical examination of research with children (Richards et al., 2015). However, this neglect is not universal and elsewhere it is common to see acknowledgment of interdependence, negotiation, reciprocity, and community as fundamental features of research with children in the majority world (see Castro, 2017; Montgomery, 2007; Twum-Danso-Imoh, 2013; Waite & Conn, 2011). Therefore, we question why the independent, autonomous voice of the child continues to be fundamental to the ongoing dominance of participatory methods. We are not arguing for the dismissal of children's voices as important for understanding children's lives, but suggest that it is more useful to consider voices as multidimensional and always relationally intertwined with the voices of others.

Recognizing the voices of children as plural and relational requires the acknowledgment of these voices when they are dissenting or silent. Rights discourses that give primacy to the voice of the child are rendered somewhat problematic when children share perspectives that position themselves outside the dominant discursive construction of childhood (Clark, 2013) or where their views are not situated within adult-defined narratives (see Philo's, 2011; work on child sexuality). James (2007) argues that despite the prevalence of children's voices in contemporary research, children still find themselves "silenced, suppressed or ignored in their everyday lives" (p. 261). This is particularly notable in research on children's economic contributions; they often express pleasure and pride in contributing to family and community (Bey, 2003). Children's dissent from adult-defined narratives is also found in Twum-Danso Imoh's (2013) research on corporeal punishment, whereby children demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the role of physical punishment in their own experiences, child-rearing practices, and wider social cultures. Here, children advocated measured physical punishment as part of effective child-rearing, a view that complicates campaigns based on children's rights agenda to abolish such practices. Upholding children's voices, particularly as experts, means listening even when such voices make us, as adults uncomfortable. We cannot declare that children are experts and their voices are vital to effective research endeavors (basing claims on contemporary rights discourses) while simultaneously referencing developmental discourses of incompetence and unknowingness to position children's views as less valid when they are not in line with dominant, adult ways of thinking about childhood. If we adopt an expanded notion of voice (Kraftl, 2013), we as childhood researchers become obligated to more effectively accommodate the voices of children who say things we may not want to hear (Montgomery, 2016).

Accommodating voices that dissent also requires greater interrogation of those who remain silent. How are those who do not want to participate conceptualized? To some extent, feminist scholars have encouraged the critical evaluation of silence as more than just the absence of data (Haavind, 2005; Lewis, 2010). However, non-participation as active choice has received limited attention in the literature on research with children. This increasing normativity of participation can result in the marginalization of those who decline. If the well-being of children is premised on exercising their rights – the right to participation as crucial – then those not engaging in this new social order have the potential to be constructed as a risk to the children's rights project itself (Bragg, 2007). Without effective, sustained, and critical evaluation, the participation project has the potential to create newly expanded categories of what constitutes the "problematic child." The will to participate in the neoliberal world results in those not doing so being "rendered senseless" (Bragg, 2007, p. 354). Participation in research, or being attributed the role of child researcher, has the potential to exacerbate existing differential opportunities (or indeed create new ones). The expanded notion of voice (Kraftl, 2013) allows us to manage the relational strategies through which voices are

articulated, and gives us space to incorporate silence as important data, rather than consigning it to passive non-response (Richards, 2013; Richards et al., 2015). This stance also accommodates the different ways children share their perspectives through emotion, action, protest, and resistance.

## Conclusion

We celebrate those childhood scholars who paved the way for more insightful research approaches and whose perspectives herald recognition of the importance of understanding children's worlds outside of adult constructions. They are responsible for the existence of childhood studies as a distinct discipline and for shaping contemporary research with children. Participatory methods have come to dominate this field and we suggest that such developments have reached a point where they are strong enough to withstand sustained reflexive critique (see Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Hammersley, 2016; James, 2007; Tisdall, 2012; Uprichard, 2010). There is a need to recognize the other agendas at play when we seek children's participation. As Raby (2014) argues, such endeavors "commonly reflect a more governmental than liberatory agenda" (p. 79). We argue such critiques are necessary in order to move the field forward and to avoid inertia in the theory, methodology, and method.

For the purposes of this chapter, the conceptual theories of participation, agency, and voice are individually considered to allow for the articulation of key arguments, but we recognize that in the theory and practice of research with children these concepts are inextricable. Nonetheless, teasing out the core principles upon which some contemporary research practices are advocated is a necessary endeavor in order to better understand the ways in which we may erroneously claim validity in our research. Facilitating the participation of agentic children and asking that they share their voice does not always lead to children's truths.

The canonical narrative of participation in research with children has advanced a number of key assumptions for childhood researchers. First, there is an assumed view that participatory methods imply ethical practice, in that they remain largely unquestioned. Second, not only are such approaches ethically preferable, but they are also (given the positioning of children as experts) the ideal route to validate data. Third, participation is positioned as emancipatory for children, but is equally representative as obligation. The adult social obligation to voice their views through societal mechanisms is neatly reframed into a citizen right when applied to children. Participation, therefore, is one of the routes through which children learn the skills necessary for adult life. Not only is it disingenuous to frame such methodologies as solely about the rights of the child, it also fails to recognize the context within which such research data is produced (Richards, 2013; Richards et al., 2015). Researchers using participatory methods must begin to recognize coercive responsibilities placed on children to participate while also championing their rights to do so.

These approaches elevate the individual agentic voice of the child, claiming children are empowered by participation. However, this does not acknowledge the social context within which children (and adults) live their lives. The concept of agency underpinning participatory methodologies only allows for the elevation of individual voice. We argue that relational agency, as a redefinition of the neoliberal articulation of individualism, would be far more effective in capturing the social competencies of children. After all, participatory methodologies are built upon notions of reciprocity and collaboration, yet we continue to ignore their presence in participatory research with children. Relational agency is inevitable in participatory methods but frequently ignored in the presentation of

research. Acknowledging such interdependency risks both the primacy of the voice of the child and the authenticity of the researcher. What is the cost of our continued neglect to the authenticity of children's interconnected contributions?

We argue that without recognition of relational agency we will continue to abstract the voice of the child from the social context within which it is produced, leading to the continued neglect of the collaborative relationships that may exist in research and the power relations certainly embedded within. The original claims that call for greater inclusion of children's perspectives remain, but we question the positioning of children as the true and superior experts of childhood at the expense of ignoring other dissenting voices. We have reached the stage where the extent of the elevation of the voice of the child risks inverting traditional hierarchies to create a new dominance – one that marginalizes both children and adults. The extent of the elevation of the voice of child, rather than providing new understanding, actually serves to generate new and different power relations, casting new shadows on adults' understanding of social worlds. We argue for an expansion of the term "voice" (Kraftl, 2013) to embrace the co-construction of voice, children's silences, their dissent, and their perspectives when they move beyond the normative constructions of childhood. Rather than focusing on the independent, autonomous, individualized voice of the child, we need to recognize the interdependent, reciprocal, and communitarian voices that inevitably emerge through participatory methods. Emphasizing shared responsibility would reduce the capacity for abstracted notions of voice to support errant claims on our abilities to authentically represent children's worlds.

We are not arguing for the demise of participatory methodologies; we are instead calling for an expanded understanding of what participation means, how it is enacted, and what it produces. We remain committed to hearing the voices of children, but claim that this voice and the corresponding commitment to participatory methods should be the beginning of critical conversations, not the end. If we are to avoid reaching a point of inertia in research with children, we have to recognize the problems as well as the potential of using these methods and the canonical concepts they embody. Otherwise, they become little more than the "cherished conceits" (Segal, 1999, p. 118) that we perpetuate, rather than interrogate, in theories of, and research with, children.

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